

# The Church's Role of Mercy in the Community

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, FORT WAYNE, MAY 2002

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*President Wenthe, honored members of the President's Action  
Committee, dear fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ,*

## INTRODUCTION

In his *Praktische Theologie*, the great 19th century Luther scholar Theodosius Harnack complained that “*diakonia* was not of interest as a constituent part of ecclesiology, but was seen only as an expression of Christian groups and societies alongside the church. *Diakonia* was described as the life-expression of a particular Christian piety active in associations and institutions.”<sup>1</sup>

The theological tradition Harnack complains about is alive and well among us today. We note, for instance, two significant points about the great dogmatics text of Franz Pieper, who along with Sasse and Elert, ranks as one of the greatest confessional Lutheran theologians of the 20th century. A cursory perusal finds not a word in Pieper's section on ecclesiology about the church having any collective role of mercy in the church or world. And second, we note that the locus on sanctification is directed entirely toward the Christian individual. Please correct me if I am wrong, but Pieper would appear to know of no collective role for the church as such as a bearer of the work of mercy, or *diakonia*, and certainly no such idea of *diakonia* as a “constituent part of ecclesiology.” Pieper, of course, stands in one venerable tradition of Lutheran theology in this regard. By “*diakonia*” we mean the act of loving service to the needy by the church as such. It is by and large what we in the English-speaking world have, unfortunately, termed

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Carter Lindberg's description of Harnack's position in “Luther's Concept of Offering” in *Dialogue*, Fall 1996, vol. 35, no. 4, p. 252.

“social ministry” (a term I am now prone to avoid for reasons I hope will become evident, not the least of which is its close association with the heresy of the “social gospel”).

The question: Has the church as church any mandate for *diakonia* as such? Has the church any role in the world in these last days beyond the proclamation of the Gospel and the distribution of the sacraments? Are acts of mercy and *diakonia* simply the expression of individual Christian piety, even when done collectively by Christians? Is *diakonia*, or mercy over against the needy, simply a matter of individual Christian ethics? Is corporate, churchly *diakonia* an adiaphoron? Does the church as such have any role over against government on behalf of the needy?

I for one believe, on the basis of the New Testament, that it is high time for us (especially us who hold to the inerrant word of God as sole source and norm for faith, and who dare yet today to confess the entire Book of Concord with an unqualified “*quia*,” and who rejoice in the fact that the confessional Lutheran church is a church firmly in the western liturgical tradition, and who believe that the Lutheran Church is a evangelistic and missionary church), to answer these questions.

Fundamental to my own wrestling with these questions has been Luther’s theology of “offering” which, as Lindberg points out, “bridges worship and social ethics, and it reminds us that both worship and social ethics are communal.”<sup>2</sup> Says Luther, “Through the interchange of [Christ’s] blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common.”<sup>3</sup> “This fellowship is twofold: on the one hand we partake of Christ and all saints, on the other hand we permit all Christians to be partakers of us, in whatever way

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<sup>2</sup> Lindberg, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup> LW 35:58, quoted by Lindberg, p. 252.

they and we are able.”<sup>4</sup> In attacking and abolishing the sacrifice of the mass, Luther got law and Gospel right at the heart of the church’s life, and fundamentally changed the trajectory of worship and the church’s life. In the sacrament, Christ is the one who sits at table to serve, not to be served. “The inhaling of the offering of Christ in the sacrament leads to the exhaling of the distributing gifts in the community.”<sup>5</sup> Lindberg aptly points out that unfortunately our American individualistic mindset tends to read the sequence of proclamation, faith, love and works in terms of individualistic ethics. The corporative character of the double faceted community with Christ and the communion of saints, so emphasized by Luther, is thus lost.<sup>6</sup>

Luther in fact, appealed to the very corporative nature of the sacrament, and its consequent, concern for the needy, while noting that in the early church the offering consisted of the elements for the communion, and the additional goods were distributed to the poor (can there be a more corporative, churchly and intentional form of diaconia?). States Luther:

*We have a vestige of this [practice] in the little word “collect” in the mass, which means a general collection, just as a common fund is gathered to be given to the poor. [Then] Christians cared for one another, supported one another, sympathized with one another, bore one another’s burdens and affliction. This has all disappeared, and now there remain only the many masses and the many who receive this sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> LW 35:67, Lindberg, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> Lindberg, p. 252.

<sup>6</sup> Lindberg, p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> LW 35:57, Lindberg, p. 253.

## DIAKONIA OF THE CHURCH AS CHURCH

Does the church have a role of mercy in the community? I believe it does. Is *diakonia* a fundamental part of the church's mission in this world? I believe it is. In fact, I'm convinced, on the basis of the New Testament, that there is a threefold reality in the life of the church as church. All three hang inseparably together. The church must be about proclamation of the Gospel of Christ (*martyria*). In fact, to the extent that any mission of the church ceases this proclamation of the vicarious atonement of Christ and salvation by grace through faith, or alters this definition of the Gospel, it ceases to be Christian. Second, the church must be on about worship (*leitourgia*). Proclamation produces faith in Christ, and draws the faithful into the full sacramental life of the church. Wherever the church would have a "mission" or endeavor that is not clearly flowing from, to and connected with altar, font and pulpit, that mission is sectarian at best, and non-Christian at its worst. Third, wherever the church breathes in the blessed Gospel and sacraments, it cannot but exhale mercy and love toward the neighbor (*diakonia*). *Diakonia* is as much a part of the church's life as good works are a part of the life of faith. This applies to Christians both individually and collectively. Wherever these three realities of the church's life are not functioning in balance, there is a truncation of the church's life, and a diminution of its mission.

After surveying the landscape of our own Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, from a unique if bureaucratic vantage, I'm convinced our churchly life is suffering this truncation. Among those dear Christians most involved in the life of our so-called "social ministry organizations," 120 of which are officially recognized by the LCMS, there is a tremendous need to re-think what it means to be confessionally Lutheran today in such circumstances and endeavors. Quite often, for a number of reasons, not least of which is the relationship of these institutions to

federal and state government, and to the ELCA, *diakonia* is thriving, but there is far less intentionality regarding *martyria* and *leitourgia*. Among those traditionally NOT involved in such institutions and endeavors (parish, district or synodical) there is a strong emphasis upon *martyria* (after all, the whole experience of the LCMS in the '70s was an attempt to re-assert the possibility of certain dogma for the sake of Gospel proclamation). In such circles, common to those present here there is also great and necessary emphasis upon *leitourgia*. However, there has been and is an ambivalence toward or even a reaction against *diakonia*. And this threatens to reduce such proclamation and liturgy to the realm of the “clanging cymbal” (1 CORINTHIANS 13). It is also the case then, that those in the church who have tended to be most intensely interested in and conservers of orthodox dogma for proclamation, and of an orthodox liturgical life, have all but abandoned the diakonic/institutional life of the church. The CEOs of Lutheran institutions who have had theological training or are ordained are disappearing. The clergy with credentials for chaplaincy are both declining in number and aging. And this is occurring just when our theological institutions are most capable of producing graduates who can distinguish between trendy, less enduring therapeutic, and more classical models of chaplaincy as *Seelsorge*. And more than ever, our students should have the tools to use first article gifts of sociology and psychology in clearly delineated service to the blessed *Seelsorge* of Gospel and Sacraments.

And make no mistake; this abandonment of *diakonia* on the institutional level has enormous consequences. Our recognized institutions make up roughly one-third of Lutheran Services of America, recently recognized by *The Not-for-Profit Times* as the largest not-for-profit umbrella in America, with a combined budget of nearly \$7 billion dollars (only 80 percent of the institutions reporting). These institutions serve millions, including tens if not

hundreds of thousands of LCMS members. LSA has the world's largest adoption network. One of every three not-for-profit nursing home beds in this country is in a Lutheran institution. Right now, more than ever, we need pastoral theologians to lead the way to create Lutheran institutions and agencies for *diakonia*, set from the start on the firm foundation of the Lutheran Confessions. We need orthodox clergy who are engaged in diakonic work, or encouraging their parishes to be in the business of *diakonia*, thereby gaining experience and credibility for service to larger institutions, via called or volunteer positions. But where is such vision? Where are such men? Where is the vision for *diakonia* in its proper relationship to proclamation and worship as the mission of the church? Where are clergy with multiple discipline training? It is time for those most interested in *martyria* and *leitourgia* to turn also to *diakonia*, both in theoretical study and practical endeavor.

#### WHAT THEN IS THE MANDATE (IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT) FOR THE CHURCH'S ROLE OF MERCY IN THE WORLD?

Loehe presents a very intriguing and unifying definition of mercy. God's love exists as an expression of His very being (1 JOHN 4:7). Love (agape) is an act of the will of God without respect to the worthiness/unworthiness of the recipient (ROM. 11:32). Mercy is love responding to need. Where divine love meets sin, mercy exists as grace in Christ. Where divine love meets bodily suffering and need, that love becomes mercy and care for those suffering. According to Loehe, care and concern for spiritual and physical need are born of the same divine love in Christ.<sup>8</sup> They cannot be separated in the life of the church (MATT. 25:31FF.; 1 COR. 13:1; JAMES 2:14FF.; GAL. 6:7FF.; 1 JOHN 3:1OFF.).

**1 John 4:7** — Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

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<sup>8</sup> See Von der Barmherzigkeit in Wilhelm Loehe, *Gesammelte Werke*, Neuendettelsau (Freimund 1962), vol. IV, pp. 468ff.



**Rom. 11:32.** — For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

**Matt. 25:31ff.** — ... as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me...

**1 Cor. 13:1** — If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

**James 2:14ff.** — What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

**Gal. 6:7ff.** — Whatever one sows, that will he also reap... Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

**1 John 3:10ff.** — By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

#### THE MANIFOLD MANDATE FOR MERCY

I use the word “mandate” here for a specific reason. A mandate is something that is “given” or literally “handed over” (*mandatum*). It is much more gift language than law language. We might simply reduce the cause of the church’s diakonic life to the command: Love your neighbor as yourself. But such a reduction does not reflect the fullness of the biblical witness on the topic. Much less does this mere law-approach to the problem provide the full New

Testament rationale, and more importantly, Gospel motivation for the church's life of mercy. What follows then, is an attempt to mine the fuller biblical and doctrinal matrix, which encompasses and propels the church's life of mercy. For it is my conviction that mercy is deeply rooted in and inseparably connected to the full dogmatic content of the faith.

1. Diakonic mercy has its source in the Holy Trinity. In Christ, a restless divine love was sent forth to find its object, a world in need of mercy (**JOHN 3:16**). Likewise, that divine love, dwelling in hearts by faith, cannot but express itself in mercy toward those in need (**LUKE 6:36; 1 JOHN 3:17-18; 1 JOHN 4:7-8; ROM. 12:1, 8; JUDE 21-22**). Thus the mercy, which marks the church's life, has its source in the Holy Trinity, and those who know and believe in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are merciful (**MATT. 18:21FF., NOTE V. 33; JAMES 3:17**).

**1 John 4:7-8** ... Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

**John 3:16** — For God so loved the world, that he gave ...

**Luke 6:36** — Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

**1 John 3:17-18** — If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. Romans 12:1, 8 — I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

**Jude 21-22** — Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on those who doubt.

**Matt. 18:21ff., v. 33** — Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?

**James 3:17** — But the wisdom from above is ... full of mercy.

2. Diakonic mercy is born of the incarnation of Christ. In Christ, God became one with and identified totally with sinful humanity. The New Testament states that such identity was necessary that Christ might have mercy upon His “brothers” (**HEB. 2:17**). Having the mind of Christ, the church is called to identify with and humbly serve the needy (**MATT. 25:31FF.; PHILEMON 2**). The overwhelming majority of New Testament passages dealing with mercy for the needy direct the church to care for fellow-believers. Therefore, this must remain a central focus of the church. Nevertheless, just as divine love in the very incarnation of Christ, the atonement, and the continued proclamation of the Gospel, is directed to and seeks all, so the church’s mandate for mercy knows only the bounds of “opportunity” and resources (**2 COR. 9:10-12; GAL. 6:10**).

**Heb. 2:17** — Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

**Matt. 25:31** — ... When did *we* see you hungry ... thirsty ... sick or in prison ...? (Note the collective nature of *diakonia*, damnation and salvation.)

**Phil. 2** — [To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons ... 1.1] So if there is any encouragement in Christ ... complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the

interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

**Gal. 6:10** — As we have *opportunity*, let us do good to everyone ...

**2 Cor. 9:10-12** — He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.

3. Diakonic mercy is born of the universal atonement (**ROM. 11:32; 12:1**). The universal condition of mankind apart from Christ, and the universality of Christ's atoning death demonstrate the equal value of each and every human life to God and thus to His church (**ROM. 3:23; ROM. 5:12FF.**). And the benefits of the universal atonement, accessed in Holy Baptism (**ROM. 6:1FF.**), bring forth a life released from self-centeredness and for service (**ROM. 7:6**). The universality of the need for and benefits of the atonement have direct ramifications for the nature of the church as a merciful corporate community, in which individual and diverse gifts are exercised for the good of the body (**ROM. 12:4FF.**).

**Rom. 11:32; 12:1** — For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all ... I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

**Rom. 3:23** — All have sinned and fall short.

**Rom. 5:12ff.** — Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin ... Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

**Rom. 6:1ff.** — We know that our old self was crucified with him ... that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

**Rom. 7:6** — But now we are released from the law ... so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit.

**Rom. 12:4ff.** — For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ ... let us use them: if service, in our serving (*diakonia!*) ...

4. Christ's Palestinian ministry ever combined proclamation of forgiveness with acts of mercy, care and healing for those in need. Wherever Christ was present to disperse the gifts of the kingdom, He did so in word and deed (**LUKE 5:17-26; LUKE 9:2-17; JOHN 6**).

**Luke 5:17-26** — “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ... I say to you, rise.”

**Luke 9:2-17** — He sent them [the twelve] out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

**John 6** — [Feeding the five thousand] Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.

5. The apostolic church continued Christ's concern for the whole person and care for the needy (**ACTS 6:1-7**). In fact, we see in Acts that a portion of the task of the apostolic office was care and concern for the physical needs of widows. The office of "deacon" was born as ministry to the needy. In faithfulness to the New Testament we will encourage and promote such "diakonic" offices today wherever possible and appropriate (deacon, deaconess, parish nurse). There can be hardly any more convincing evidence than the ordination of the deacons that diakonic tasks were and ought remain "churchly" and corporate, and not merely in the realm of individual ethics (**ACTS 4:34-35; ACTS 11:29-30**).

**Acts 6:1-7** (Note the daily distribution.)

**Acts 4:34-35** — There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. [Note: churchly collection and distribution]

**Acts 11:29-30** — So the disciples [collectively] determined, every one according to his ability [individually], to send relief to the brothers [church] living in Judea. And they did so, sending it [collective, singular] to the elders [a churchly office for churchly distribution] by the hand of Barnabas and Saul [apostles and evangelists].

6. *Diakonia* is born of New Testament sacramentology; consequently it flows from the sacramental/liturgical life of the church. Lives that have received mercy cannot but be merciful

(JAMES 2:13FF.; JAMES 3:17). In Baptism a merciful washing begets merciful living (ROM. 6:1-4; 7:4-6). In confession and absolution the merciful word of the Gospel begets merciful speaking and living (MATT. 18:21FF.). In the Supper Christ gives himself totally for us, that we might give ourselves totally to our neighbor (1 COR. 10:15-17; 1 COR. 12:12; 26).

*“No, we must on our part make others’ evil our own, if we desire Christ and His saints to make our evil their own; then will the fellowship be complete and justice be done to the sacrament. For the sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a man that he is made one with all others”* (Luther, *Sermon on the Blessed Sacrament*, 1519).

**James 2:14ff.** — What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

**James 3:17**—But the wisdom from above is ... full of mercy.

**Rom. 6:1-4; 7:4-6** — We ... died to sin ... Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God ... But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve [*diakonia!*] in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

**Matt. 18:21ff.** — You wicked servant! [he said.] I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?

**1 Cor. 10:15-17** — Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

**1 Cor. 12:12ff.** — For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many ... If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

7. The vocation to mercy is as broad as the need of the neighbor (**MATT. 25:31**), and applies to Christians as individuals (**MICAH 6:6-8; MATT. 9:12-13; MATT. 5:7; LUKE 10:37; ACTS 10:2; 4; ACTS 9:36; 2 TIM. 1:16**) and to the church as a whole, whether local or synodical (**1 COR. 16:1-4; ACTS 11:28ff.; ROM. 15:26; 2 COR. 8:1-15; ACTS 24:17**). The work of mercy is also an expression of churchly unity (**2 COR. 9:12-15**).

*“Therefore the church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops — equal according to the office (although they may be unequal in their gifts) keep diligently together in unity of teaching, faith, sacraments, prayers, and works of love, etc.” (Smalcald Art.II.4.9).*

**Matt. 25:31ff.** When did we see you hungry ... thirsty ... naked?

**Micah 6:8** — What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? [though this is addressed to Israel collectively]



**Matt. 9:12-13** — Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

**Luke 10:37** — He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

**Acts 10:2; 4** — [Cornelius was] a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God . . . And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”

**Acts 9:36** — Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity.

**2 Tim. 1:16** — May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains . . .

**1 Cor. 16:1-4** — Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

**Acts 11:28ff.** — So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

**Rom. 15:26** — For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

**2 Cor. 8:1-15** — We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part ... Your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need.

**Acts 24:17** — Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.

**2 Cor. 9:12-15** — For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

8. The “royal priesthood” of the baptized exists for mercy (**ROM. 12:1FF**). We concur with Paul Althaus:

*The priesthood means: We stand before God, pray for others, intercede with and sacrifice ourselves to God and proclaim the Word to one another. Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the “Protestant” sense of the Christian’s freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian’s*

*evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as community* (The Theology of Martin Luther, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, p. 314).

**Rom. 12:1ff.** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship ... The one who does acts of mercy, [let him do it] with cheerfulness.

9. People exist created by God as body and soul. This unity — though temporarily interrupted as a result of temporal death — will continue in a physical eternity, after the resurrection on the last day. Christ came as a man, body and soul, to redeem all, body and soul. The church's concern is therefore for the whole person. The proclamation of the Gospel of forgiveness by grace through faith is accompanied by Christian concern for physical and psychological need as well as spiritual need. If it is not, it is a ministration, which is less than the intent of Christ at best, and Gnostic (denial of the unity of body and soul) at its worst. The concern and care for physical need is accompanied by proclamation of the Gospel and a concern for incorporation into the church's life, or it is merely secular at best, and may deprive of eternal life at its worst. Proclamation of the Gospel and mercy for the needy belong together like faith and love.

10. The church exists to proclaim the Gospel and to administer the means of grace. These are its *sine qua non* mandate and source of existence. These only, as the unimpeachable guarantees of the church's presence, are its sole "marks" (A.C. VII). These central, permanent and dominant marks are not, however, its sole tasks. Jesus said of His preaching of the

Gospel, “For that is why I came out” (MARK 1:38). Then the text states immediately, “And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and *casting out demons*” (MARK 1:39). (Can we think of a more intensely spiritual/physical ailment?) Then states Luke’s Gospel, “A man full of leprosy . . . begged him, ‘Lord, If you will, you can make me clean’” (LUKE 5:12). Christ’s miracles bore witness to His person. They also pointed to a fully healed eschatological future. So today, mercy in the life of the church bears witness to Christ’s gospel, and its eschatological ramifications. “The proclamation of the gospel produces faith in those who receive the gospel. They call upon God . . . . They do good works on account of the glory of Christ. In this way the name of the Lord becomes great among the nations” (Ap. XXIV.32).

**ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT, THREE THINGS BELONG TOGETHER IN THE CHURCH’S SACRED TASK OF MERCY:**

- 1. Proclamation** (*Martyria*) of the Gospel of forgiveness by grace, through faith in Christ’s cross. (ACTS 6:1-7. Note: the “ministry of the word” is the priority for the apostles.)
- 2. Worship** (*Leitourgia*), which first receives Christ’s gift of forgiveness, then sings his praises (ACTS 2:42).
- 3. Merciful service** (*diakonia*) of the neighbor, especially those in need. (ACTS 6:1-7. Caring for the needy was administered by the apostles. That responsibility was kept by the apostolic church, but transferred to the diakonic office created for this purpose, not merely relegated to the realm of private piety.)

I am convinced that there is an overwhelming explicit and implicit mandate for mercy as a corporate churchly task, inherent in biblical Lutheran theology. Perhaps you have noted that I have not mentioned much of the church’s missiological task. Though I

do think much could be said on this also with respect to *diakonia*, in fact, I wonder if our missiological efforts are a poor reflection of those of the early church, at least in part, because we have failed to keep these three (proclamation/worship/*diakonia*) in unity. After the “deacons” are ordained (ACTS 6:7) the text states, “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” I have not talked about “missions” and *diakonia* as some remedy for our domestic missional doldrums. That is because then I would be talking about us, about our doing, about another program, as opposed to “being” what our merciful God has made us in Christ.

The great strength of this magnificent institution is in being. This seminary has taught us what it means to be Christ’s, to be confessionally Lutheran, to be sacramental, to be Christological, to be liturgical, to be biblical, to be called to an office, to have a vocation. The single greatest influence upon my theological life was moving from Kurt Marquart’s classroom on dogma to Kramer chapel where the dogma, the doctrine lived and lives in its sacramental verities at altar and pulpit. And so I don’t ask you to train anyone to do an additional task, to add another “job” to the agenda. What you have done and done magnificently is to teach the church and its clergy the centrality of *martyria* and *leitourgia*. Now, I plead with you to turn your attention to the task of a theology of mercy, and to begin to teach us what it means to be merciful in the life of the church that we may fulfill our vocation to mercy in this world, and in so being, be ever more what Christ in his mercy has called us and made us to be — a people of mercy.

*Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.*

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